

A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns

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Elgar Research Agendas

 **Edward Elgar**
PUBLISHING

Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

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Published by
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited
The Lypiatts
15 Lansdown Road
Cheltenham
Glos GL50 2JA
UK

Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
William Pratt House
9 Dewey Court
Northampton
Massachusetts 01060
USA

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022946663

This book is available electronically in the **Elgaronline**
Geography, Planning and Tourism subject collection
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4337/9781800887121>

ISBN 978 1 80088 711 4 (cased)
ISBN 978 1 80088 712 1 (eBook)

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Between urban and rural: socio-spatial identities in small and medium-sized towns

Annett Steinführer

Introduction

Scholarly research has long disbanded the rural–urban dichotomy or binary (Pahl, 1966; Champion and Graeme, 2004). Rather, ‘planetary urbanism’ is said to penetrate each and every place at all geographical scales (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). Urbanism is considered ‘a way of life’ (Wirth, 1938), moulding people’s daily lives and biographies in settlements of different sizes and with rather distinct morphological and social characteristics.

It is probably not by chance that such assertions are usually made by urban (and rarely by rural) scholars – and even more, by researchers that work on and/or live in large cities or megacities of the Global North, be they New York, Chicago, London or Berlin. They refer to political-economic processes of global transformation, large-scale urban sprawl and the creation of polynucleated metropolitan regions leaving no space for something that, in seemingly former times, used to be called ‘rural’ (‘the erstwhile “countryside”’) (Brenner and Schmid, 2012, pp. 10–11). Such claims do not only prioritise a metropolitan perspective, they also hardly take daily-life accounts of residents living in distinct socio-spatial environments, be they suburban neighbourhoods, peripheral villages or small rural towns, into consideration. Interestingly – and in contrast to scholars claiming the hegemony of ‘the urban’ in current societies – there are other strands of research highlighting continuously strong images by residents and outsiders about ‘the urban’ (e.g. Brown, 2015) that significantly differ from images of ‘the rural’ (e.g. van Dam et al., 2002).

It is fascinating to analyse how small and medium-sized towns, as ‘understudied locales’ (Brown-Saracino, 2020; see also Mayer and Lazzeroni, Chapter 13 in this volume), are perceived both by scholars from urban and rural studies

and by residents in terms of their urbanity and rurality. It will be interesting to check whether small and medium-sized towns are placed somewhere on an urban–rural continuum or whether the claim of all-embracing urbanism is also made for these types of settlement.

Set against this background, this chapter explores meanings of and ascriptions to the rural and the urban, respectively, in the context of small and medium-sized towns. It does so predominantly from a Central European perspective where towns and cities often originated in the Middle Ages or the early modern times (1500s/1600s). Small and medium-sized towns first became a meaningful type of human settlement with the emergence of the industrial city in the course of the nineteenth century.

The first part of the chapter considers why to date it is mainly large cities – rather than any other type of urban settlement – that attract urban scholars' attention. But neither do small and medium-sized towns play a large part in rural studies. This fact also needs some exploration. Subsequently, I will change the focus to the subjective perceptions of residents of small and medium-sized towns. I will argue that references to characteristics conceived as either urban or rural are a relevant frame of socio-spatial reference of the residents of small and medium-sized towns shaping their local identities. It is even the opportunity to relate to both perceived urban and rural traits that account for the specific socio-spatial identity of the residents of small and medium-sized towns. As most of these insights and reflections stem from single case studies in different national contexts, a number of research needs arise. Along with the conclusions of this chapter, these are the content of the final section.

Placing small(er) towns in urban and rural research

Small(er) towns from an urbanity perspective

In the course of the nineteenth century, industrialisation and subsequent rapid urbanisation brought about a new quantity and quality of urban life. The city, then, was increasingly considered as its normal expression. In some languages (e.g. German or Czech) compound words emerged to denominate the new societal reality (*Großstadt*, *velkoměsto*) and to distinguish it from just 'towns' (*Stadt*, *město*; for different terms and delimitations in various countries see also Steinführer et al., 2021b, pp. 16–17). In 1887, the first session of the International Statistical Institute defined three spatial categories according to population numbers. Based on a decision already taken during the Institute's

founding meeting in 1885, the lowest limit was a population size of 2,000. All settlements with fewer residents were called ‘countryside’ – or rather, since this part of the report from the memorable session was published in French (and written by a Hungarian statistician), *campagne*. The upper boundary of 100,000 inhabitants was reserved for a newly denominated urban form: the *grandes villes* (‘cities’). The settlements and social realities between these two poles were simply called ‘towns’ (*villes*) (Körösi, 1887, p. 212). These efforts arose out of the necessity felt by the then elite of the discipline of statistics to provide reliable, internationally comparable and spatially sensitive data.

Also the newly emerging social sciences – first and foremost sociology – developed their relationship to the new type of human settlement. While ambiguity or even overt criticism prevailed (e.g. Engels, 1845), Georg Simmel’s famous essay *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (‘The metropolis and mental life’, recently retranslated as ‘The metropolis and the life of spirit’; Boy, 2021)¹ was the first sociological diagnosis of the interdependencies between the socio-economic environment and individual behaviour in the newly emerging cities. Published in 1903, the essay remains a splendid classic of (not only urban) sociology to date. However, when re-reading this essay with an interest in small(er) towns, other issues come to the fore. It is striking, for example, that ‘small-town and country life’² (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193]) are mentioned in one breath. They are described as being characterised by a ‘slower, more habitual, more regular rhythm in the very sensory foundation of the life of our souls’ (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193]). The quote continues as follows:

This accounts for the intellectualised character of metropolitan life as opposed to small-town life. In small towns, life is founded upon relationships of disposition and emotion that have their root in the more unconscious strata of the soul and are more likely to grow out of the quiet regularity of uninterrupted habits. The place of the intellect, on the other hand, is in the transparent and conscious higher strata of our soul. (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193])

In a small town, ‘inhabitants are almost all acquainted and in positive relationships with one another’ (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 122 [p. 196]) and its ‘sphere of life is usually fully self-contained, while metropolitan life crucially moves outwards in waves across a wide-ranging national and international surface’ (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 126 [p. 198]). As Simmel is particularly concerned with the habitus of the modern city dweller, he also formulates clear statements about his/her counterparts. Simmel holds that ‘the metropolitan individual is “free” in contrast to the pettiness and prejudice that confine the small-town dweller’ (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 126 [p. 197]).

Simmel was not at all interested in the small town or in empirical evidence for his assertions but only in the new phenomenon of the city (in his case Berlin) with its particular mental expressions, metropolitan way of life and differentiated division of labour. In order to make the underlying social changes and their impacts even more impressive to the reader, he established the 'small town' as a negative ideal type to heighten the contrast.

Thus, Simmel's concept of the small town is not a definition. Yet, probably not only in Germany, his conception of the modern metropolis strongly influenced urban research and legitimates a hegemony of city-related research and 'the urban' compared to 'the rural' to date (e.g. Helbrecht, 2013). Some 35 years later, Louis Wirth's paper 'Urbanism as a way of life' (1938) strived at providing clear-cut criteria for urban settlements of different types. The larger the population size, the more dense and heterogenous, the more it is appropriate to speak of a city. Interestingly, his fourth criterion – a permanent settlement – was not treated equally to the others by Wirth. Particularly with regard to small and medium-sized towns in Europe, but also in parts of Asia, this criterion would be relevant to pay adequate tribute to small and medium-sized towns today. Wirth's sociological definition of the city as a 'large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogenous individuals' (Wirth, 1938, p. 6) suggests a graduation of urbanism across different types of human settlement. But it also allows for describing small and medium-sized towns from a mere deficit perspective (ARL, 2019, p. 8) – as those urban settlements that always have 'less' than the 'truly urban' cities.

A non-deficit urban(istic) perspective on small and medium-sized towns, then, considers as minimum requirements a certain population size (without strictly delimiting it) and a compact built-up area with a distinguishable urban fabric (Servillo et al., 2017). In Central Europe, this is typically a market square in the centre, a town hall and often the remains of a medieval or baroque fortification or their replacements in the form of a ring street or a promenade (Hannemann, 2004, p. 21). These built structures provide physical as well as symbolic evidence of the formerly relevant borough rights (or town privileges) granted to these settlements by an emperor. Thus, small and medium-sized towns, at least in Central Europe, often have a century-long non-agrarian – i.e. urban – history with a local *bourgeoisie*, a developed division of labour and socio-spatial differentiation. Also today, their economic basis differs and is often a mixture of manufacturing, handicraft, services and tourism (Powe and Hart, 2008).

Small and medium-sized towns from a rurality perspective

Relating Simmel's (1995 [1903]) or Wirth's (1938) understanding of urbanity (or urbanism) to small and medium-sized towns and contrasting them with cities usually leads to a characterisation as comprising 'less': less people, less capital, less infrastructure, etc.

To date, there is no complementary 'rurality' perspective on small and medium-sized towns from a theoretical standpoint. Similar to urbanity, rurality is also conceptualised in different ways. Cloke (2006) distinguishes a functional, political-economic and constructivist approach. Functionally, rurality refers to the structural characteristics of rural areas, often with the intention of distinguishing them cartographically from urban areas. The primary sector or agricultural and forestry land use play an important role in this. In the second approach, external, above all economic and political, factors influencing the development of rural areas are highlighted with different conceptual references (e.g. regulation, centre-periphery and globalisation theories), thus locating rurality in social theory. Finally, rurality is perceived as socially constructed, appropriated and reproduced. Research from this perspective is interested in 'how practice, behaviour, decision-making and performance are contextualized and influenced by the social and cultural meanings attached to rural places' (Cloke, 2006, p. 21). Rurality, then, is defined as 'a multiplicity of social spaces overlapping the same geographical area' (Cloke, 2006, p. 19). The aim of these and similar conceptualisations (e.g. Halfacree, 2004) is to leave any idea of a clear-cut urban-rural binary behind and to establish a pluralised understanding of rurality that is neither deficient nor idyllic.

The relevance of a rurality perspective for small and medium-sized towns can be approached from two angles: first with regard to their regional roles and second relating to their physical structure and size of their territory.

There are quite a few studies that are interested in the importance of small and medium-sized towns for their surroundings. Powe and Shaw (2004), for example, investigate so-called country or market towns in England by taking the example of one small town in Northumberland. They focus on the town's centrality functions – mainly with regard to service provision – to people in the urban hinterland and provide evidence for strong rural-urban relations (for a more general approach see Powe and Hart, 2008). Yet, already in the early 2000s, the authors pointed to the threat to local services through internet orders by villagers. Another function – that of being a tourist centre – is highlighted in research by Lazzeroni et al. (2013) for a medium-sized Tuscan town and by Vaishar et al. (2016) for small towns in Bohemia and Moravia.

Steinführer and Kabisch (2005) analysed the example of a highly peripheralised small town in Saxony and focused on how and why insider and outsider perspectives differed in terms of negative (internal) and positive (external) judgements. The tourism function is usually relevant on different scales: for employment on the local and the regional scale; for visitors (e.g. of spa towns) on the regional and national scale; and for international tourists on a European or even global scale. Also, the research by Gkartzios et al. (2017) on regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece relates to their functions on a larger scale by taking a look at mobility decisions by counterurbanists from larger settlements and local movers, i.e. those who changed their residential location within the same area. The authors call their spatial setting under investigation as ‘neither rural nor urban’ (Gkartzios et al., 2017, p. 30).

Despite their name, small and medium-sized towns are not always small in territory. In Germany, for example, about 25 per cent of the small towns (according to the official delimitation of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development)³ are larger than 100 km². Extreme cases have a territory well beyond 500 km², often as a result of large-scale territorial reforms from the early 1970s onwards. A number of villages were territorially, politically and administratively incorporated into these new settlement units. With regard to their land use and settlement structure, small and medium-sized towns thus became heavily ruralised (Steinführer, 2016). The territorial reforms were intended to make public government more efficient and contributed to a centralisation of public and private services and, thus, an increase in the functional importance of the urban cores for the rural hinterland (for territorial reforms in a broader perspective, see Swianiewicz, 2010, 2018).

The ‘urban’ and the ‘rural’ in the eyes of residents of small and medium-sized towns

The question of how residents of small and medium-sized towns perceive their socio-spatial environments in terms of urbanity and rurality, respectively, has not been well researched. Some personal and rather episodic accounts relate, for example, to a rural idyll remembered as the setting of one’s childhood, not least given the contrast to later study experiences in Chicago (Brown-Saracino, 2020). The author describes her childhood in New England in a countryside setting ‘with rolling hills, farm fields, and forest, a three-classroom-schoolhouse, Methodist church, general store, and Town Hall’ (Brown-Saracino, 2020, p. 217). Accordingly, she calls this place

a ‘rural town’ (Brown-Saracino, 2020, p. 217). This pastoral – and strongly Anglo-Saxon – perspective on the rural and the rural idyll did not remain unquestioned in rural studies in the past decades (e.g. Gkartzios et al., 2017; Shucksmith, 2018). However, from a number of case studies, one might reach the conclusion that landscape-related aspects are a major asset of small and medium-sized towns – and, even more importantly, these landscape attributes are considered as belonging to the town’s appearance. References to the surrounding landscape by both residents and ‘outsiders’ (mostly tourists) in answering the question concerning ‘what they liked most’ in a certain town was found by Lazzeroni et al. (2013, pp. 463–466). Also, in Hannemann’s (2004) study on declining and peripheralised small towns in north-eastern Germany, the small-town dwellers’ perceptions of being at home there (in the German original, *Heimat*) was strongly linked to the qualities of the surrounding landscape (Hannemann, 2004, p. 224). Finally, from their research on counterurbanisation trends in Greek non-metropolitan regions, Gkartzios et al. (2017) highlight the coexistence of ‘urban–rural identities’ (Gkartzios et al., 2017, p. 24). All these atomised findings deserve more systematic attention, comparison and supplement.

There are some promising conceptual approaches and empirical studies on so-called ‘lay perspectives’ (or ‘discourses’) on rurality (van Dam et al., 2002), partly complemented by imaginations of so-called ‘professionals’, like planners or scientists (e.g. Halfacree, 2004). Based on a survey in four municipalities in the Netherlands (two medium-sized and two suburban towns), van Dam et al. (2002) found that ‘countryside’ was mainly associated with morphological-visual aspects (such as greenery or farms) and with, as they call it, socio-cultural aspects (such as quietness, serenity and social control) (van Dam et al., 2002, p. 465). The desire to live in a residential environment with characteristics was not restricted to places in the countryside. Rather, quite a few respondents also imagined such residential qualities in an urban surrounding. The authors call this a ‘demand for living in the pseudo-countryside’ (van Dam et al., 2002, p. 469). Most of such research focuses on rural places and a ‘town perspective’ is not pursued. While, of course, there are a few urban ‘counterparts’ investigating whether and how perceived place attractiveness and urban amenities play a part in migration decisions (e.g. Brown, 2015), comparative research between villages and towns, between towns and cities or, to put it more generally, between human settlements of different size, fabric and functions is lacking. Such research could enhance our understanding on the actual role of spatial attributes framed as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ in residential preferences and decisions.

Table 2.1 Subjectively perceived rurality/urbanity by residents of different settlement types in Germany (2020; n=3,595)

Respondents living in ... ^a	Number of respondents	Subjectively perceived rurality/urbanity (1 = rural, 7 = urban)		
		Mean	Median	Stand. Dev.
Large cities	544	5.8	6	1.45
Small cities	512	5.3	5	1.50
Large medium-sized towns	404	4.3	5	1.69
Small medium-sized towns	688	3.4	3	1.68
Large small towns	577	2.9	3	1.68
Small small towns	508	2.3	2	1.46
Rural municipalities	362	1.9	1	1.22

Note: Question wording: 'How would you describe the area surrounding your current home within a radius of about 5 kilometres? Is it more rural or urban? Give 1 for "rural" and 7 for "urban". You can use the values in between to grade.'^a See note 3 for the German settlement typology.

Source: Own calculations based on data of a German-wide population survey in 2020 (unweighted; see text for more information); settlement types (including their designation) according to BBSR (2022).

In the frame of a large-scale population survey in Germany in 2020,⁴ we had the chance to apply an already tested indicator of subjectively perceived rurality and urbanity on a seven-point scale (Kreis, 2021) among residents of different types of human settlement – from rural municipalities to large cities. From the results in Table 2.1 it is striking that both mean and median values of subjective perceptions correspond to the official 'ladder' of rurality and urbanity. A relevant 'jump' is to be found between smaller and large medium-sized towns which might point to the fact that medium-sized towns are not only highly heterogeneous in terms of population size (in Germany they range from 20,000 to 100,000) but also with regard to their economic structure and regional functions. Yet, and most interestingly in the context of this chapter, the highest variance of the subjective assessments (as measured by the standard deviation) was found in medium-sized and larger small towns – thus providing evidence for the hypothesis that in these spatial settings both urban and rural socio-spatial identities are most present.

Based on long-term research in and on smaller towns and a broad literature review in the context of a German network of small-town researchers (Steinführer et al., 2021a, 2021b) as well as some specialised research on larger

Table 2.2 'Urban' and 'rural' characteristics of small and medium-sized towns

Characteristics pointing to a higher degree of 'urbanity'	Characteristics pointing to a higher degree of 'rurality'
Urban fabric (e.g. multi-storey buildings at least in centre), historic buildings pointing to (former) importance as central place (e.g. market square)	Reasonable/manageable size
Distinguishable socio-spatial structures (urban neighbourhoods, centre versus fringe)	Perceived social proximity and safety
Professional administration with a certain degree of specialisation and differentiation	High degree of civic engagement
Formal town status (municipal/borough rights)	High share of long-established owner-occupiers
Diversity of public and private infrastructure, centrality (excess importance)	Limited amount of offers and opportunities for social advancement
Functional specialisation (e.g. tourist destination, residential, spa or industrial town)	Proximity to open landscape

Source: Author's considerations particularly based on Steinführer et al. (2021a, 2021b) and the references quoted therein and Schmidt-Lauber (2010).

towns (Schmidt-Lauber, 2010), Table 2.2 summarises perceived characteristics of small and medium-sized towns and places them on the rural–urban continuum. Along with recent scholarly literature from a broader European context (e.g. Servillo, 2014; Servillo et al., 2017), the table goes well beyond population size and also considers morphological, functional, social and administrative characteristics.

Conclusions and open research questions

Small and medium-sized towns, as well as their long-term dwellers, in-migrants and visitors, are fascinating places and actors to explore ascriptions to and meanings of socio-spatial identities along the urban–rural continuum. Urban and rural studies provide meaningful concepts of urbanity and rurality to be applied to towns of various importance and centrality functions as well as in different locations and countries. However, small and medium-sized towns

are rarely considered in urban studies and their degree of urbanism tends to be described in deficit terms. Nor do rural studies systematically approach and investigate rural or regional towns.

Subjective or daily-life accounts of urbanity and rurality are an open research field that can provide us with relevant supplementary knowledge on socio-spatial identities in the settings of small and medium-sized towns. While it might be rather straightforward to locate a megacity and a small village on the urban–rural continuum, small and medium-sized towns are more ambiguous settlement types as they often contain an urban core and rural parts in their vicinities. This makes them particularly interesting for considering both scholarly and residents’ perspectives on these socio-spatial settings.

From a methodological point of view, there is a wide range of single case studies focusing on one certain topic and often applying a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, but hardly allowing for cross-case comparisons. A second strand of research comprises national or cross-national comparative studies using quantitative and geographic information system methods (e.g. Servillo et al., 2017). The issues raised in this chapter seem to first and foremost require qualitative approaches, but large-scale population surveys could also be employed. Mixed-methods approaches are thus highly appropriate to empirically analyse scholarly, media and resident ascriptions to and ideas of the urbanity and rurality of small and medium-sized towns. Comparative approaches within one country or in a cross-country context seem to be particularly worthwhile. One might contrast insider and outsider perspectives (as, for example, in Lazzeroni et al., 2013 or Steinführer and Kabisch, 2005). Comparative research on urbanity–rurality perceptions across different types of settlements (from villages to megacities) would be thrilling.

A multitude of unanswered research questions can be derived from both the urban and rural self-images and the characteristics attributed to small and medium-sized towns, such as the following:

- Which residential qualities are required by long-term dwellers and which ones by new in-migrants in small and medium-sized towns? In what way do they differ from the residential qualities expected from or attributed to villages or large cities? How can they inform theoretical accounts of urbanity and rurality?
- How does the widespread spatial attribute of ‘reasonable’ or ‘manageable’ size (see Table 2.2) relate to social relationships? What about social distance and how to keep it?

- Which medium- and long-term implications do large-scale territorial reforms in rural areas (Swianiewicz, 2010, 2018) bring about for both the socio-spatial and local identities of village dwellers and the residents of the former (more) compact small and medium-sized towns?
- What is the symbolic meaning of formal town status? Do respective status changes still have a symbolic value for decision makers and the towns' residents today?
- Did functional and symbolic attributes to small and medium-sized towns change during the COVID-19 pandemic and will they last in the 'post-pandemic' era?

Not least, such findings can provide valuable insights for urban and rural planners as to which residential qualities are required in the socio-spatial settings of small and medium-sized towns.

Notes

1. All subsequent quotes are taken from this new translation.
2. Equating small(er) towns and rural settlements is quite common in the United States (e.g. Vidich and Bensman, 1958; Dubbink, 1984) and most prominent in the widely used phrase of 'rural and small-town America' (e.g. Fuguitt et al., 1989; Mattson, 1997). From a (Central) European perspective, the relevance of historical town privileges and a corresponding urban fabric (e.g. a town wall) and, thus, the town's formal and symbolic distinction from a rural settlement must not be underestimated to date.
3. In Germany, cities are considered places with more than 100,000 inhabitants ('smaller cities' range from 100,000 to 200,000, 'large cities' have more than 200,000 inhabitants) (see also Körösi, 1887). 'Smaller medium-sized towns' range between 20,000 and 50,000, 'large medium-sized towns' between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. 'Small small towns' have, as a rule, between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants and 'larger small towns' between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. In addition, for small towns the formal centrality status is taken into account (Milbert and Porsche, 2021, p. 14).
4. As the survey mainly intended to investigate migration and staying decisions, it consisted of five subsamples: one group of rural stayers (people living in rural areas for ten years or longer) and four migration groups (people having migrated between rural and urban areas or vice versa as well as people having migrated within rural areas or between cities in the past five years before the survey). The survey was part of the research project KoBaLd which is jointly conducted by the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies (Braunschweig) and the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (Dortmund) (September 2018–October 2022). The project was supported by funds of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture based on a decision of the Parliament of the Federal Republic

of Germany via the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food under the Rural Development Programme.

Suggestions for further reading

A comprehensive overview of the state of small-town research in Germany.

ARL (Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung). ed. 2019. *Small town research in Germany – status quo and recommendations. Position Paper of the ARL 114*. Hannover: ARL. (Extended German version: Steinführer, A., Porsche, L. and Sondermann, M. eds. 2021a. *Kompendium Kleinstadtforschung. Forschungsberichte der ARL 16*. Hannover: ARL.)

An inspiring paper of how to approach and conceptualise rurality that might also be used for conceptualising other types of spatialities (such as urbanity). It is worthwhile applying this thinking to small and medium-sized towns to go beyond the urban–rural binary.

Cloke, P. 2006. Conceptualizing rurality. In: Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P.H. eds. *Handbook of rural studies*. London: Sage, pp. 18–28.

A short introduction into the largest European research project on small and medium-sized towns in recent years (TOWN, 2012–2014, funded by ESPON).

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